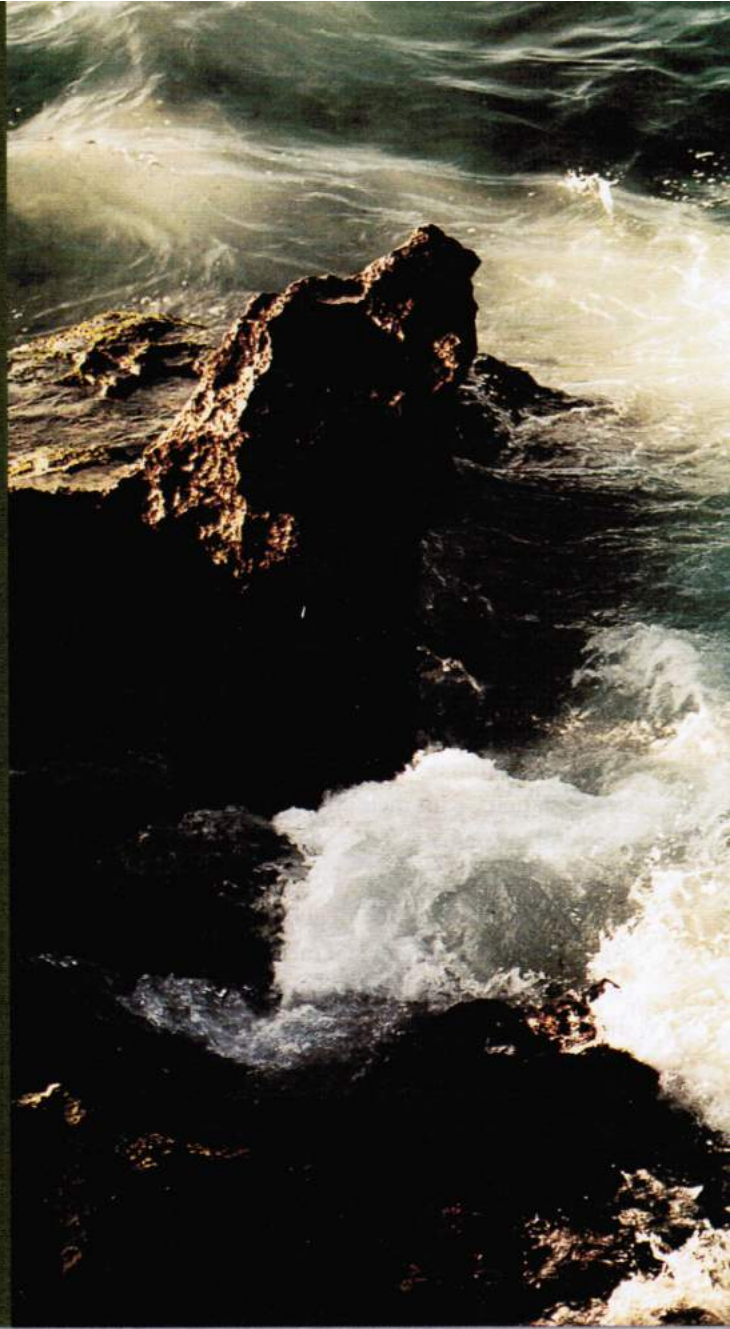


THERE ARE MANY LINKS BETWEEN MIAMI, Florida, and Havana, Cuba, but perhaps the most obscure of them dates from the 1920s when a Miami subdivision called Coral Gables was being developed. Its houses were built in an imaginative historicist, or traditional, style that might be labeled Spanish Tropical Dream. Contributing to their consistent look were loads of weathered roofing tiles taken from buildings in old Havana. ▶



THE FUTURE *of* HAVANA'S PAST





The challenge of architectural conservation on a shoestring | **By** Jonathan Lerner | **P**hotography by Andy Anderson



This may have been plunder, but Havana's long, rich history certainly made it able to withstand the loss. In 1930, the entire population of Dade County, Florida, barely topped 140,000. Havana, by contrast, had been founded in 1519, and in 1930 it had nearly five times Dade's population.

With its position at the entrance to the Gulf of Mexico, Havana was historically the jewel of Spanish America. It grew rich over the centuries not only from the profits of Cuba's plantations but also from transshipping goods for the whole Western Hemisphere: silver from Mexico, gold from Peru, slaves from Africa. Havana was a wealthy, cosmopolitan city before the United States was a country.

The legacy was a priceless environment wonderfully built to human scale: miles and miles of intimate streets lined with balconied buildings that date from the 16th to the mid-20th centuries. They jostle together happily, as if dancing to the island's delirious rhythms, right next to the ocean, beneath the tropical sky: colonial-era houses with tiled, flower-draped patios; belle époque mansions as sinuously sculpted as any in Paris or Barcelona; jazzily chiseled and streamlined art deco blocks; modernist villas and towers whose glassy severity is a perfect foil for Cuba's lush intensity. Havana's wealth, coupled with the showy exuberance of Cuban culture, resulted in most of these buildings being lavish, fully realized examples of their various periods and styles.

But today, most of them are teetering wrecks. Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution focused attention and resources away from the capital to the countryside and the poor. As a result, Havana's buildings and infrastructure have gone without repair for 40 years. "Buildings that aren't maintained can't last," observes Lee Cott, professor of architecture at Harvard

failures and the punishing U.S. blockade—is poor. Some sophisticated restoration projects are under way in Havana, but these address only a fraction of the need.

Can Havana be saved? It's both a preservationist's dream and nightmare.

In some ways, Castro's regime must get credit for preserving Havana. Its revolution promptly canceled a plan by the defeated Batista government for a sweeping, North American-style, automobile-oriented urban renewal that would have dismantled the old city. In addition, Cuban citizens have not been free to relocate at will. Because of that prohibition, Havana has not experienced the population onslaughts that have overwhelmed places such as Mexico City. Additionally, the communist system did not allow speculation in land or private for-profit construction—restrictions that hindered destruction or "improvement" of existing structures.

"In Havana, many buildings have been lost through decay, but they were not demolished for replacement," notes the Cuban-American town planner Andres Duany. "That's extraordinary. In the last half-century, we Latin Americans have presided over the loss of our capital cities: Caracas has disappeared; Quito and Lima are no longer recognizable. They have been eradicated as civic entities through the elimination of the type of building which defines spaces that are useful, interesting, and beautiful—spaces that generate pride of citizenship."

Not so Havana, which may be forlorn but is still lovely. The most prominent parts of the city are four contiguous districts linked by a broad seafront boulevard called the Malecón. Habana Vieja (old Havana), the original settlement

Cubans have a fierce appreciation of their inheritance and seem unwilling to let it be built over.

University. "Thirty to 50 years ... then they begin to go." On innumerable blocks, there are piles of rubble where buildings have simply fallen down or empty places where even the rubble has been removed. The culprit is rain, tropical soakings that leak through roofs and rotting interior structures. Bad storms frequently cause new collapses.

Permitting this precious cityscape to disintegrate would be as costly to the world's cultural heritage as letting Venice sink into its lagoon. But Italy is a rich country, with resources to prevent such tragedies. Cuba—due to its own

once encircled by walls and forts, hugs the harbor. It contains the oldest buildings made of wood and adobe. But many early structures there were replaced in the 18th and early 19th centuries with opulent stone townhouses that open onto serene interior courtyards. This area is the locus of most preservation effort. Many old mansions have been renovated as museums, galleries, restaurants, and boutique hotels. The quarter's plazas and some of its narrow thoroughfares are now reserved for pedestrians. Habana Vieja is the main tourist area but is a bustling residential neighborhood, as well.

Immediately to its west is a 19th-century extension, Centro Habana, where there are some grand plazas and public buildings but mainly block upon block of residential streets. These have similar dimensions to those of Habana Vieja, and the buildings have a similar look but are taller. Built mostly as apartment houses, they have four or five stories, not two or three, and air shafts instead of interior patios. Consequently, Centro's population and street life are denser.

Just west of Centro Habana is Vedado, a leafy district of single houses and small apartment buildings to which the wealthy began moving around the turn of the 20th century. By midcentury, this was also a business and hotel district, and so it contains quite a few modern high-rises. Beyond Vedado is Miramar, developed from the 1920s through the 1950s with an even more suburban feel. As was the case in Vedado, homeowners in Miramar spared no expense to show off their wealth in the elaborate, eclectic façades of their houses. Some Miramar homes are traditional in style, but many are ultramodern.

These areas were the richest when built; they contain the big civic institutions and the places tourists want to see. Behind them stretch 19th- and 20th-century neighborhoods, erected for working- and middle-class people, that are less grand but with many of the same appealing features. There are interconnecting grids of narrow streets. House fronts are adorned with porches, balconies, and fanciful detailing. Buildings along main avenues have continuous arcades—recessed sidewalks for shelter from sun and rain and for neighborly interaction. And here and there in greater Havana are colonial-era villages that have been engulfed by the metropolis but remain rich in historic character.

Anybody who has ever had to maintain a house—especially an old one—will quickly grasp the problem of preserving a city this huge, decrepit, and inundated by tropical deluge. "The most important single issue," says Mario Coyula, director of the Group for the Capital's Comprehensive Development, a Havana urban-planning think tank, "is where the money will come from."

With the collapse of the Soviet Union a decade ago and the end of its considerable subsidies to the island nation, Cuba was thrown into economic crisis. About that time, UNESCO designated Habana Vieja a World Heritage Site. International tourism—first rejected and then halfheartedly developed by the revolution—suddenly seemed an obvious source of income. Through international joint ventures, a peninsula 90 miles east of Havana called Varadero has been developed in a big way, with resort complexes seemingly

interchangeable with those of Nassau or Cancún. And a couple of giant, and aesthetically inappropriate, hotels have gone up in Havana. But Cuba can also offer tourists its fascinating urban heritage at a time when exploring culture and history is increasingly why people travel.

Cubans have a fierce appreciation of their inheritance and seem unwilling to let it be built over. "The Cuban preservation community has been incredibly tenacious in getting the government's support," notes Gustavo Araoz, executive director of the U.S. committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a nongovernmental organization of architects and preservation activists. "There's always a tendency with socialist governments to use culture as a



political tool, but here it goes deeper." The government has decided that in Habana Vieja (and in other architecturally significant locales throughout Cuba), the official local historian has responsibility for both tourism and conservation. Profits from the one must finance the other. "We don't know of any other place in the world where the preservation and cultural needs of an area are placed above other needs," Araoz says. His hope is that this might inoculate Havana from the negative effect that even well-meaning architecturally oriented tourism can have, such as gentrification, which displaces long-time residents.

In Habana Vieja this formula is producing some inventive strategies. One example is the establishment of half a dozen small hotels (with more on the way) that exude a

historic and distinctly Cuban charm that the characterless internationally developed high-rises can't match. Not every renovated palace ends up with a tourist use, either; some become, for example, schools. There is a commitment to retaining the area's current population, even as room is made for visitors. One approach, with that in mind, is to restore the façades of important buildings while reconstructing their interiors for up-to-date, though modest, living units.

Another innovative project is taking place in the section of Habana Vieja probably most interesting to visitors with a deep passion for the esoterica of old places. San Isidro is rough and poor; this was not where the rich built their grand townhouses, and it is not where galleries and cafés



are opening today. It has some of Havana's oldest and humblest buildings and a severe lack of amenities, though it is crowded with residents. Now earnings from tourism in the showier parts are underwriting a community-oriented rehabilitation of San Isidro. Water, sewer, and power lines are being improved. Residents are given loans, technical assistance, skills training so they can repair their own homes, and even temporary housing in the neighborhood if they need it. First priority went to the 45 percent of buildings deemed least deteriorated in order to quickly create a sense of possibility, improvement, and momentum.

This reveals something often overlooked: The most useful preservation is not just of individual buildings. "The important thing is to save entire urban sectors," says Andres

Duany. "What is missing in this world is not great buildings. The tragedy would be if the city were destroyed everywhere a little bit."

Havana's challenges differ from district to district. Mario Coyula, the Havana planner, says, "Before the revolution, people tried to present their best to the street. It may have been hypocritical, but it made the city what it is." The loss of what he calls this "urban culture" is now a threat, especially to Vedado.

The problem there is makeshift additions. These not only deface individual houses, but compromise the whole area. Lee Cott explains, "There's a standard street grid, with buildings placed on the blocks in identical ways. You end up with this wonderful repetitive fabric: You know what the next block's going to be like because of where you're coming from. That's being destroyed because, with the enormous pressure for living space, people are building additions—changing setbacks, filling in courtyards and front gardens, building on the roofs. It's eating away at the open space and the area's basic design."

Duany cites a more ominous threat to Vedado. "This 1920s 'City Beautiful,' with villas, wide avenues, and trees in place is now the rarest urban type in the world. In every city, it's the part that's been demolished for high-rises." With financial and technical aid from several regional governments in Spain, 14 blocks of the Malecón in Centro Habana are being restored. This will make a beautiful front wall for the city and enhance the seaside, which is often used for recreation. The vast district behind it, though, is problematic because of the concrete-slab and I-beam construction used there. "We're seeing a lot of deteriorated unreinforced concrete," notes Gustavo Araoz. "It hasn't been maintained or painted. Once the moisture and salts from the sea spray enter, the steel beams begin to expand and corrode."

The problems are different for the less prominent parts of the city. "The poorer peripheral neighborhoods are easier to repair," says Mario Coyula, "since the houses are smaller and simpler and lack the elaborate detailing." But these are not places tourists will drop dollars. Being far from the coast and important city-center sites, these areas will have no hotels or cafés. Unlike Miramar, with its spacious boulevards and big exquisite houses, they don't attract embassies or the offices of foreign corporations.

If Havana is a world treasure, who outside Cuba should help to save it?

"The first responsibility for those outside Cuba falls with Cuban Americans, who claim this as their cultural heritage,"

asserts Araoz, himself Cuban-born. "They have a moral obligation." But this, of course, immediately brings up politics and the bitter history of conflict between Cubans who stayed and those who went into exile.

One of the latter is Alberto S. Bustamante, a retired physician in Orlando, Florida, who a few years ago started Cuban National Heritage, an educational foundation, partly as a way to get around the political stalemate. "The only common language, when a country is divided, is its culture," he says. His group has tried to foster communication between Cubans in the United States and those involved in heritage work on the island. "But everything we try to do is taken by the Cuban government with mistrust because they think we are dissidents looking to overthrow the regime. And most of the exiles feel that any help to any institution in Cuba will keep Castro in power. These are big obstacles."

Castro is aging, and in small ways his government has been relaxing control. Public opinion in the United States seems to be tipping toward an end to the blockade. Whenever relations between the two countries do normalize, it's reasonable to expect a surge of returning, and investing, Cuban Americans. But Andres Duany is not optimistic about their potential impact on the beleaguered city. "However much they love Havana, Cuban-American developers have learned development patterns that are completely incompatible. They don't know how to do anything but American-style development—walled subdivisions, office parks, big-box stores."

Alberto Bustamante seems more hopeful about Cuba's maturing generation of technocrats. "They were educated in East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and have the mentality of perestroika. They're the leaders of

dotted with holiday isles edged with beach resorts, only came into being in the last 40 years. That's the same period when the United States has enforced its economic blockade of Cuba, including a prohibition against U.S. citizens spending money there, effectively banning travel. Sometimes, on the way somewhere else, we fly over Cuba. We can look, but we can't touch.

It wasn't always this way. Until the 1959 revolution, Cuba was the Caribbean's main tourist destination, with U.S. citizens making up the majority of its visitors. They went for the beaches, racing, sport fishing, and Havana's urbane pleasures, as well as architecture, theater, and ballet.

Havana was a seductive playground. Most Cubans were poor, but their capital city was rich. It's said that Havana had more Cadillacs per capita than anyplace else on earth. Wild clubs throbbed with music all night long. Chorus girls kicked high. There was gambling, smuggling, prostitution and drugs, much of it controlled by U.S. mobsters.

Now, after a 40-year break, "Havana for the weekend" sounds inconceivable. But it's not. I did it myself while reporting this article. There's still music everywhere, and dancing, and plenty of rum. Travelers from the United States are welcomed with warmth. And Havana may be one of the safest big cities in the Western Hemisphere.

Culture, expressed in a people's spirit, embodied in the places they inhabit, is the real lure of travel. For this, Havana can't be beat. I felt so at home there that I began to wonder if I'd been Cuban in a previous life. Then I realized that this delicious sense of comfort is simply what overtakes you in a city of consistently beautiful structures built to a human scale.

It's still illegal for U.S. citizens to spend money in Cuba,

Culture—in a people's spirit, in the places they inhabit—is the real lure of travel. For this, Havana can't be beat.

the future. They are already more flexible."

"If the world wanted to help Cuba right now," says Duany, in all seriousness, "it would send roof tile. Even tarpaulins—it doesn't have to be the final material. Just stop the infiltration of water. It's that simple."

Details, Details, Details / For most U.S. citizens, Cuba might as well have fallen off the map. What could be stranger than a sizable nation only 90 miles away—with which our own history is intimately linked—rendered a no-go zone?

The Caribbean as most of us know it, a turquoise sea

but tourists haven't been prosecuted. Getting there and being there are only slightly more challenging than any other long weekend trip you might take. There's a fresh crop of guidebooks by Time Out, Knopf, and Fodor's. The real problem with a weekend in Havana is that it ends too soon. /END/

Jonathan Lerner writes on travel and design for HEMISPHERES, InStyle, and Travel+Leisure. His novel *Caught in a Still Place, about love and survival in the face of ecological disaster, is available in print-on-demand from www.penpowerpublishing.com.*